# A step-by-step refresher on how a bill becomes a law

*Understanding this process helps you recognize when and how to engage in advocacy—whether that means submitting testimony during hearings, contacting lawmakers ahead of a key vote, or weighing in on a committee’s agenda. Your voice shapes the future of disability policy.*

## Introduction of a Bill

While anyone can draft a bill, only a Member of Congress can introduce it. The process of enacting a bill into law begins in either the House of Representatives or the Senate, with one major exception: **revenue-related bills**, including **budget reconciliation bills**, must originate in the House.

* **Bills**: Must pass both the House and Senate and be signed by the President to become law.
* **Joint Resolutions**: Function similarly to bills and require approval by both chambers and the President.
* **Concurrent Resolutions**: Require passage by both chambers but do not go to the President and do not become law.
* **Simple Resolutions**: Passed by only one chamber and do not become law.

Each bill receives a number, such as **H.R. 1279** (House) or **S. 2819** (Senate), and is printed by the Government Publishing Office before heading to committee.

## Referral to Committee

After introduction, the bill is referred to the appropriate standing committee(s) based on subject matter. Some bills are sent to multiple committees if they touch on various issues.

## Committee Action

Committees play a gatekeeping role. Under normal order, if the committee does not take action, the bill effectively dies. The committee chairperson controls the agenda and can refer the bill to a subcommittee.

## Subcommittee Review

Like the larger committees, subcommittees study the bill and often hold hearings, which allow stakeholders—including federal agencies, experts, and advocates—to present testimony. This is a key opportunity for advocates to shape the narrative.

## Mark Up

Following hearings, the committee or subcommittee may propose changes or amendments. If approved by a subcommittee, the bill is sent back to the full committee for further review. If approved by a full committee, the bill advances to the floor.

## Committee Vote to Report

The full committee reviews the bill and amendments, then votes on whether to "report" the bill to the full chamber. A committee can also kill the bill by voting it down or never bringing it to a vote.

## Committee Report

If the bill is reported favorably, committee staff prepare a written report explaining the bill’s purpose, legal implications, and perspectives from both supporters and dissenters.

## Scheduling Floor Action

Once reported, the bill is scheduled for debate by House or Senate leadership. In the House, the Speaker and Majority Leader have significant control over the schedule.

## Floor Debate

## In the **House of Representatives**, debate is typically time-limited and governed by the Rules Committee. In the **Senate**, however, debate is generally unlimited, creating the opportunity for a **filibuster**, a tactic where one or more Senators deliberately prolong debate to delay or block a vote on legislation. To end debate and proceed to a vote, the Senate must invoke **cloture**, which requires **60 votes**. Once cloture is achieved, additional debate time is limited, allowing the chamber to move forward with a final vote.

## Voting

## After debate concludes, the bill is brought to a vote. In the House, most legislation passes with a **simple majority (218 votes)**. In the Senate, once cloture has been invoked (if needed), a bill typically passes with a simple majority of 51 votes. Sometimes the Senate can circumvent this requirement. For example, under the special rules of the budget reconciliation process, the filibuster cannot be used, meaning reconciliation bills bypass the 60-vote threshold entirely and can pass the Senate with just 51 votes, making reconciliation a powerful tool for advancing major fiscal and policy changes.

## Referral to the Other Chamber

The second chamber repeats the process—committee review, potential amendments, debate, and vote. They can pass the bill as-is, amend it, reject it, or ignore it.

*Conference Committee (if needed)*

If there are significant differences between the House and Senate versions, a **conference committee** is formed to reconcile them. If an agreement is reached, both chambers must approve the final version (conference report).

*Presidential Action*

The final bill is sent to the President, who may:

* **Sign it** into law.
* **Veto it** (Congress can override with a 2/3 vote in both chambers).
* **Take no action**: If Congress is in session, the bill becomes law after 10 days.
* **Pocket veto**: If Congress adjourns during that 10-day window and the President takes no action, the bill dies.

*Overriding a Veto*

If vetoed, Congress can override the veto with a **two-thirds vote** in both the House and Senate. If successful, the bill becomes law without the President’s signature.

*The Process, Visualized*

The image below depicts a flow chart of the journey legislation takes on its way to becoming law.

A diagram of a house

AI-generated content may be incorrect.